

AKSU Journal of Social Sciences
(AKSUJOSS)
ISSN: 2504 – 933X
Vol.7,No.2 (June) 2026,pp. 86-95
DOI: https://doi.org/10.61090/aksujoss.7.2.86-95
URL: htpp://www.aksujournal.com/vol.7.2

Received: February 24, 2026
Accepted: May 3, 2026
Published Online: June 1, 2026

Cultural Practices, Human Rights, and the Pursuit of Social Justice in Rivers State, Nigeria

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Abstract
Shared beliefs are an essential part of human existence; it is to this that culture is considered collectively the yardstick for living by members of a population. Therefore, this study examined the impacts of cultural practices on the human rights of indigenes of Tai Local Government in Rivers State. Three research objectives and questions guided the study with a cross-sectional research design. In-depth Key Persons Interview and questionnaire schedules constitute the primary method of data collection. Purposive sampling techniques were used to source and reach 399 respondents from a 117,797 population, and Natural law theory was the theoretical underpinning. Data generated were analysed using descriptive statistics and interpretive thematics. The study reveals a nexus between cultural practices and human rights infringements. While cultural practices are rooted in the locality, they are often perpetuated against, particularly women and erring adults. Extrapolating from the findings, it is recommended, amongst others, that social development scholars strongly advocate for those affected by these cultural practices by consistently persuading those directly involved in the implementation, to convince them of the negative impact of harsh cultural practices on human social functionality. Also, government should enunciate social policies that will help check rights infringements across cultures to protect vulnerable groups, and social welfare organisations should be involved by offering pro bono services to those whose rights have been infringed upon that are willing to seek redress.

Keywords: Cultural practices, Human rights, Self-determination, Human dignity, Social exclusivity.

Introduction
The question of human rights and their perception across diverse cultural contexts has long sparked intense debate, sometimes even resulting in conflict and war. Fundamental differences in the value

placed on human rights arise, as what is seen as a breach in one society may be accepted or even revered in another. Rights theorists remain divided: some argue for universal standards that should apply globally, while others advocate for cultural relativism, insisting that each culture should be free to define and operationalise its own rights standards (Donnelly, 2013). The researcher aligns with the latter, recognising that cultural practices are particularistic and context-dependent, but stresses the need to uphold universal principles of human dignity and self-determination.

Despite the argument for cultural flexibility, a universal framework remains necessary to prevent rights infringements. Across the globe, various legislative measures have led to the violation of individual rights, especially those of women. Notable examples include Nigeria's Penal Code (1990), which criminalises same-sex relationships; Sudan's Public Order Act (1998), which restricts women's dress and movement; India's Hindu Succession Act (1956), which disadvantages women in inheritance; Brunei's Sharia Penal Code (2014), which permits corporal punishment; and Yemen's Personal Status Law (1992), which allows for child marriage. These laws reinforce gender-specific human rights violations by prescribing what is acceptable for women.

Customary law further perpetuates discrimination against women in multiple domains. As Ndulo (2011) highlights, women are frequently denied rights to inheritance and land ownership, while men control access to resources. Customary norms may legitimise forced marriages, early marriages, male supremacy, and polygyny, and restrict women's rights to divorce or child custody, privileging men by default. In matters of conflict management, customary law often excludes women from negotiation and decision-making roles, reinforcing patriarchal authority and limiting female agency.

Empirical evidence underscores the marginalisation of women in peacebuilding processes. According to the United States Institute of Peace (USIP, 2016), women accounted for less than 10% of arbiters, 5% of facilitators, and 2.5% of peace brokers in thirty-one major peace deals between 1992 and 2011. More starkly, women participated in only ninety-two of 585 peace processes brokered from 1990 to 2010. Systematic denial of women's rights to property, child custody, and participation in decision-making processes perpetuates broader rights violations and gender-based discrimination. Strict enforcement of customary standards by traditional authorities hinders the erosion or evolution of these practices, even in the face of modernisation, making it increasingly difficult to fully uphold the human rights of women in patriarchal societies.

Statement of the Problem

Culture is an important aspect of a person's life. It defines role expectations for different genders, thus capable of creating gender balance in most African societies. This makes its practices a design for living held together by members of a certain locality. The culture of Africans is particularly unique to them, as they employ varied cultural elements in almost everyday occurrences; these cultural elements in some way may transcend beyond community cohesion, thereby causing restrictions on individual natural rights and privileges. Cultural practices and human rights often intersect, leading to tensions and conflicts. These practices may (in some way) prioritize collective interests over individual rights, limiting personal freedoms and expression and perpetuating gender-based discrimination in some cases.

It is on this note therefore, that, this paper investigated cultural practices and human rights abuse in Tai LGA. of Rivers State, a rural population where culture is wholly expressed in diverse forms, to identify the factors that shape the willingness of individuals to conform to cultural practices that

may impinge on human rights regardless of their consequences and latent outcomes. To this end, the research will identify cultural standards that impede human liberties, assess the impact of norms on social adaptation, and examine common dehumanization induced by customary values and factors influencing it in Tai LGA. These will constitute the questions the research intends to answer.

Conceptual Explication

Culture and Cultural Practices

Culture constitutes a design for living that is collectively held and transmitted within a population, encompassing unique patterns of behaviour and thought shaped by environmental context, artefacts, ingenuity, and moral convictions (Chuku & Worgu, 2024). It represents the totality of a people's consciousness, defining and distinguishing them from others. Culture thus forms a critical source of identity, requiring in-depth understanding of a group's practices, adaptive strategies, and worldview to perceive them accurately. The means by which individuals and communities adapt to their environmental and social realities fundamentally informs their cosmology, influencing their responses to both internal and external challenges.

The primary concern in this discourse is not merely to analyse how culture is formed or expressed, but to interrogate whether such expressions impact the human rights of individuals within those cultures. While understanding cultural motivations can foster objectivity and reduce ethnocentrism, evaluating the implications of cultural practices on rights is essential for improving human welfare and societal functionality. Culture, as humanity's effort to assign meaning to social existence, shapes collective thought, moral frameworks, aesthetic values, and shared faith. It is not innate but acquired and transmitted through social interaction. Cultural practices, such as rituals, ceremonies, artistic expressions, language, cuisine, and social customs, are thus central to community identity and cohesion.

Human Rights

Human rights are those basic natural and legal entitlements, privileges and freedom granted human beings to enjoy because they are humans. Theses entitlements are inalienable, liberal and universal; it cuts across the choice of association, economic liberty, healthcare sustenance, human dignity, etc. and cannot be given up. Human rights and freedom even though not enshrined in the constitution of some nations are acceptable as a way of life and a basic principle of rule of law for such nations, while in some others, it is clearly written down and respected as part of its statutes (Oghenefavwe, 2021). The individual is notably primary to matters of rights and entitled to it regardless of any form of affiliation, whether birth, nationality, race, gender, capabilities or inadequacies, and if supposedly infringed upon, the individual is at liberty to seek redress in a court of competent jurisdiction to resolve the breach of rights. Igboin (2011) agrees with the above view as he declares the breach of an individual's rights constitutes an acceptable basis for a justified claim. Thus, any request to uphold one's natural liberties is not frivolous but a necessity supposedly free from any encumbrances, even within the confines of the Law.

Remarkably, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights- ICESCR documents that: *"In accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the ideal of the free human beings enjoying freedom from fear and want can only be achieved if conditions are created whereby everyone may enjoy his social, economic, political, and cultural rights" (Igwe, 2024).* This goes on to emphasize that Human rights decrees ought to ensure the protection of individual members of a state against any form of abuses- inhuman treatment whether legally,

culturally, or otherwise known, that may lead to functional disruptiveness

Human rights abuse within specific cultural situations

There is no universality in upholding human rights across cultures, as diverse indigenous and international examples depict practices and/or policies that are a clear violation of rights. Pakistan is fingered as an example of a society in which women are often deprived of the right to control their own lives and hold their own (Critelli, 2010). This observation may not be different from what obtains in other parts of Sub-Sahara Africa. Amnesty International, in their 2002 report, stated that in tribal settings of Pakistan, women are reduced to the status of property, waiting to be exchanged through marriages among families for wealth and social status, or to resolve strife. Hence pawn and gift marriages are ubiquitous. Domestic violence is also said to be prevalent (Hassan, 2000; Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2010; Perveen, 2009). In Pakistan, women are constitutionally accepted as equal citizens and the international law of rights is acknowledged but in practice women are often relegated, and there exists a huge gap in terms of their basic human development compared to their male counterpart (Perveen, 2009).

Another example of a prevalent age long cultural practice that violates specific human rights include altering of the female genitalia by chopping off its parts for no medical concerns, otherwise known as Female Genital mutilation (FGM). FGM is been practiced for decades and erroneously perceived as promoting utmost femininity amongst the female folk in Bayelsa, Nigeria, rather than curbing female enjoyment of sex (Worgu, 2024). This is a violation of the right of women to hold their dignity as humans and many more so exist in several cultures across the globe. Thus, there is the need for continuous research and sensitization to challenge the status or standards of culture as it affects individuals' rights in various cultural settings across the globe, particularly patriarchal cultures where women are vulnerably relegated to the background on issues concerning their human rights.

The Law, Human rights, and Culture: Contending Issues

The stance of the law, universal human rights, and the somewhat expression of cultural elements have long been contested. This conflict continues to be a subject of major debate in most scholarly article in cultural studies, social work, law, behavioural and social sciences, and even global socio-cultural relations. This is because, while some societies may strictly uphold human rights standards, some others are nonetheless seen as breaching a number of legally upheld natural liberties yet considers it an expression of cultural values. Healy (2007) observes that the issue of rights has drastically affected women more than any associated gender identities, and will continually remain contentious until gender equality is embraced in all societies.

At the 1948 UN General Assembly where the Universal Declaration of Human Rights-UDHR was adopted, forty-eight states were said to be in favor, whereas eight states abstained because of reservations in the areas of social rights (Human Rights Watch, 2011). The argument between two main conflicting schools of thought on the idea of human rights lies in their position on whether or not fundamental human rights should be universal, whilst the Universalist school believes in the universality of rights to the extent of fixation of moral rules and regulations (actions are inherently right or wrong) regardless of circumstances and era, the Relativist school on the other hand, argued that ethical decision making along rights line should be based on circumstances and periods as the world consists of immensely diverse cultural leanings (Dolgoff et al., 2005). Therefore, each society should formulate their own human rights standards based on their cultural evaluation. On this note, the researcher opines that whatever be the case with rights, whether

universal or relative, the need for humans to overcome obstacles (natural or manmade) that impedes on their social functionality is paramount.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Natural law theory. Some Classical Greek philosophers, such as Aristotle, Plato, Thomas Aquinas, and John Locke made up the list of both proponent and exponents of this theory. Exponentially, John Locke in 1689 in his "Two Treatises of government", expounded the natural justice axiom laid by Aristotle, in it, he defended the principle that men are by nature at liberty and unopposed to fundamental forces of nature- justice. That is, fundamental to the human nature is justice, liberty, and the right to live; that humans have certain privileges, ideals, and responsibilities that are inherently natural, therefore depriving them of these basics on the basis of culture practices, is depriving them life itself and this can grossly impair their social functioning. Apparently, the theory states that some actions are classified as either right or wrong due to divine providence, hence, validating or reproving an action could also be left to humans' rationality, hence human can alter cultural norms that affect human existence to live a more fulfilling life.

Empirical Review

Mbagwu, (2019) systematically interrogated harmful cultural practices and the health of rural women in Ebonyi, Eastern Nigeria, employing descriptive statistics in a survey design with 1,962 sample size purposively selected based on 40% of the universe. The findings revealed that early-forced marriages, female circumcision, widowhood practices and nutritional taboos were dominant detrimental cultural practices prevalent in the area. Educational empowerment was recommended amongst others to curb exposure to such inclination.

Onyemuche, (2000) systematically employed mixed-method approach in interrogating the Impact of Traditional beliefs on Widows' rights in all six Nigeria's geo-political zones, with 2800 stratified random selected subjects including 135 interviewees as sample size. The result proved that certain cultural practices, such as widowhood ritual and initiation rites contributes to the abuse of rights of women. Sensitization campaign was proposed as part of the recommendations.

Worgu (2024) employed descriptive design in examining the cultural predisposition of FGM on the health of women in Bayelsa State, with Yenagoa LGA. as its universe, adopted three research questions and objectives, and culture bound as the theory of the investigation. The findings revealed FGM undermines the health of women, and their adoption of FGM was solely cultural with the erroneous idea of improving femininity on the girl child. Crucial amongst the recommendations were the proposed dissemination of proper health education to refute cultural claims to that effect, and creation of accessible health care programmes by welfare/ health organisations and link the mutilated woman.

Methods and Materials

This study was conducted in Tai Local Government Area (LGA), situated in the Ogoni ethnic region of Rivers State, Nigeria. Tai LGA is a predominantly agrarian community, with a population of 117,797 as per the 2006 census and a land area of approximately 159 km². The region is bordered by Eleme (north), Khana/Oyigbo (east), Gokana (south), and Okrika (west), and is characterised by extensive oil pipeline networks due to significant oil drilling activities. Major occupations include crude oil production, farming, and fishing, which serve as key revenue sources for the local authority. Tai's headquarters is located at Sakpenwa and comprises over 30 communities and three main clans: Tuatua, Barasinonwa, and Tai Central. The area is divided into

10 political wards, forming Tai constituency in the Rivers State House of Assembly within the Rivers South-East Senatorial District (National Population Commission, 2006).

The population is predominantly Ogoni, speaking the Tee dialect, with African Traditional Religion and Christianity as prevalent faiths. Tai is culturally rich, celebrating events such as the Aminikpo dance, Dua festival, and Bee age grade ritual. Cultural observance is strict, with community leaders ensuring compliance. Primary data were collected through interviews and a structured questionnaire, with six interviews and 393 valid responses (total n = 399). Descriptive statistics, based on responses assessed using a 4-point Likert scale (SA, A, D, SD), were used for analysis. A criterion mean of 2.5 was set as the acceptance benchmark; items with scores below this were rejected. The questionnaire demonstrated a reliability coefficient of 0.82, and qualitative interview data were analysed thematically. This approach enabled the identification and summarisation of patterns of human rights violations.

Results Discussion

Research Question 1: What nature of cultural standards impede human liberty in Tai, LGA.?

Table 1: Mean score on cultural standards and human liberties

S/N	Questions	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Sample	($\bar{x}$) Mean	Decision
1.	Traditional authorities limit freedom of expression; there is the need to be silent against all odds?	145	131	63	54	1153	393	2.9	Accepted
2.	Women are restricted from participating in decision making that affects their wellbeing?	200	146	17	30	1302	393	3.3	Accepted
3.	Individuals are subjugated to inextricable customary rites at the demise of their partner?	163	162	39	29	1245	393	3.1	Accepted
4.	Women can't inherit property?	179	184	24	6	1322	393	3.4	Accepted
5.	Upholding Girl marriage is given topmost priority over pursuing education?	192	151	30	20	1301	393	3.3	Accepted
6.	Suppression of dissent; Elders resist credible ideas that are not in conformity with cultural standards, even though it may enhance community development?.	171	135	63	24	1239	393	3.1	Accepted

Source: Researcher's Field Work Survey, 2025

Research Question 2: To what extent does cultural norms impact social adaptation in Tai LGA?

Table 2: Mean score on cultural norms and social adaptation in Tai.

S/N	Questions	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Sample	(x̄) Mean	Decision
7.	Weaponized beliefs are considered a norm due to induced cultural conformity?	150	149	47	47	1188	393	3.0	Accepted
8.	Fear of punishment: restriction, exclusion, stigmatization, ostracism restrain many people from opposing harmful customs?	125	139	71	58	1117	393	2.8	Accepted
9.	Women have been relegated to think themselves as property that can be sold out, hence are not eager to fight for their rights?	110	196	41	46	1156	393	2.9	Accepted
10.	The cultural norms are flexible enough to allow for social growth and change?	46	40	166	141	777	393	1.9	Rejected
11.	People are comfortable not challenging cultural ills, in order to stay socially connected?	138	169	61	25	1206	393	3.0	Accepted
12.	Individuals are often stigmatized or severely cautioned by tradition authority for mere violating customary codes and/ or refusing to adhere to apathetic cultural practices to prove their supposed innocence?	145	148	58	42	1182	393	3.0	Accepted

Source: Researcher's Field Work Survey, 2025

Research Question 3: What factors influence the common dehumanization induced by customary values in Tai LGA?

Table 3: Mean score on contributing factors to cultural dehumanization

S/N	Questions	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Sample	(x̄) Mean	Decision
13.	Gender differences and bias triggers sustained rights violation?	162	96	87	48	1158	393	2.9	Accepted
14.	Limited education and socio-cultural authority influence cultural dehumanization?	134	127	68	64	1117	393	2.8	Accepted
15.	A person's age contributes to sustained harmful cultural treatment against them?	182	106	58	47	1209	393	3.0	Accepted
16.	Ignorance, cultural myths, superstitions and beliefs justifies harsh cultural practices?	92	159	106	36	1143	393	2.9	Accepted
17.	Social rejection prevents people from confronting bad customs and fighting for their rights?	152	148	68	25	1213	393	3.0	Accepted
18.	Poverty makes people vulnerable to cultural	186	148	32	27	1279	393	3.2	Accepted

oppression?.

Source: Researcher's Field Work Survey, 2025

Table 4: Showing Interpretive Theme Responses for KPI data.

Questions	Interviewee- Response	Source (Age/Sex)
Are there customs in tai that makes people feel less human or degraded?	Yes, a lot; Dua festival, inheritance denial for women and freedom of expression restrictions, are major. Even if a woman is older, she can't inherit land, only the males are privileged to be allocated communal land for farming. Also, women are restricted from going out during the Dua cultural festivals.	**Anonymous Females 62, 68 Years**
Why are women's freedom of movement and/or of expression restricted?	I can't say, but presume it's culturally constructed due to patriarchy.	
Are you saying that women are most affected with human rights cultural infringements?	Yes. In most cases but it cuts across other gender too.	
Do people speak up against harmful cultural practices?	People rarely do, due to fear of being cursed or ostracized, so they stay silent against their wish. New ideas by younger people on how to address cultural rectitude without inducing subtle dehumanization is considered an aberration and affront to the custodians of culture.	
Have you ever suffered human rights restriction due to cultural expectation?	Yes, I was treated like a criminal during my husband's demise; I was constrained from expressing my opinion as to the circumstances that led to his demise but was pressured into accepting dehumanizing customary practices/tradition to prove my innocence regarding his death. I initially disagreed but was shamed by relatives, so I conformed.	**Anonymous female 46 years old.**
Are there specific factors that determine how people are treated under these customs?	Family origin; If you are coming from a low status - poor family, it worsens; you are quickly labelled outcast in any case of insubordination to cultural norms that may infringes on rights, and can't enter certain homes.	
Why are women's freedom of speech restricted?	Because women are considered primarily as mere home carers that should not express opinions on serious public matters amidst men's gathering.	
Why do aggrieved persons not speak up against cultural deprivation?	By speaking up, you are at the peril of either your family, husband's family, community or the clan. You will be readily excommunicated socially and traditional; restricted from communal farm lands, gatherings, other healthy-beneficial cultural activities.	
How do you think your cultural practices contribute to a better standard of living for Tai people?	Absolutely, our culture helps us stay connected and co-exist as members of the community. Our beliefs, norms and values enable us uphold rectitude in communal life. Any individual bridge of traditional value attracts some kind of punishment.	**Anonymous male 48. 57. 66 years.**
What range of punishment do people face when they bridge norms?	Depends on the severity of the violation. Ranges from flogging to ostracism.	

Are individuals allowed freedom of expression before punishment?	It depends on the circumstances; if you are caught in the act, you will be judged out rightly.
Are women part of those who enforce cultural sanctions? Why not.	No. Women's anatomy are different from men so they cannot be involved in such serious cultural matters. Women don't go to war, so enforcement of cultural sanctions and decision making requires that one has the prowess to react to the outcomes of one's decision.
Why does the traditional leadership pattern in Tai restrict women from decision making and expressing themselves in community life?	Men are the head of homes, women should learn under them, even the bible say so. Thus, adhering to traditional patterns will help individuals gain acceptance.

Source: Researcher's Field Work Survey, 2025

The data gathered from the study highlights significant concerns regarding weaponisation of cultural practices and their violation of human rights in Tai Local Government Area with a mean higher that the criterion mean in more than 90% of the survey items. A staggering number of respondents believe that cultural practices affect human rights, underscoring a widespread recognition of the issue within the community. This strong consensus points to an urgent need for interventions aimed at addressing these cultural elements, standards, and values which may contribute to systemic rights infringements.

The responses confirm that cultural norms and values immensely impact freedom of expression, movement, gender equality, and decision making. The study validates Mbagwu (2019), that women are most vulnerable, facing cultural silencing in public life, reducing them to the status of 'property' that can be done away with on purpose. Also, dissent is not tolerated and cultural power structures reinforce conformity. Social-economic status, limited education, and age trigger sustained rights violation while poverty, stigmatization and fear of social exclusion significantly contribute to individuals' vulnerability, hence inducing cultural submission. Other notable abuses include harsh widowhood rites (a gender-based violence) coercing women to prove their innocence in a case of deceased spouse, both of which illustrate how cultural practices can lead to both physical and psychological abuse which may have either long- or short-term repercussions on the victim.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study reveals a complex interplay between cultural practices and human rights abuses in Tai LGA. While cultural practices are deeply rooted in the community, they often perpetuate harm and discrimination against vulnerable groups, particularly women. To address these abuses, it is essential that Development experts, Social Workers/ Social Welfare organisations promote social cultural sensitivity and understanding, by educating communities about human rights and their intersection with cultural practices, engage with community leaders and stakeholders to challenge harmful practices, support and empower vulnerable groups to advocate for their rights. By adopting a nuanced and collaborative approach, we can work towards a future where cultural practices and human rights are reconciled, and the dignity and well-being of all individuals in Tai Local Government Area are respected and protected.

Recommendations

From the findings, the following are recommended:

1. Social Workers should strongly advocate for those affected by these cultural practices by consistently persuading those directly involved in the implementation, to convince them of the negative impact of harsh cultural practices on human social functionality.
2. Social welfare organizations should be involved by offering pro bono services to those whose rights have been infringed upon that are willing to seek redress. The outcome of such litigation, if positive, will deter further human rights infringements due to such cultural practices. This is so because it will serve as a deterrent to others who wish to act outside the confines of the law.
3. Social workers should employ community engagement initiatives and organize workshops, enlightenment campaigns, town hall meetings, and dialogues (with community, religious leaders, and traditional rulers) to raise awareness about human rights and cultural sensitivities and practices.
4. Government should consistently review and reform social policies to ensure they align with human rights standards and protect vulnerable groups. As this will create a cultural revival that will ensure the promotion of cultural practices that respect human rights and dignity and encouraging cultural values of equality and justice. Social welfare organizations should establish support services for victims of human rights abuses, such as counseling, legal aid, and shelter.

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